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Pollen On Your Nose

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Pollen On Your Nose /write/ popular/Sleeppoem



by Calvin Seerveld

In 1997, my colleague Danie Strauss asked me to translate a beloved sonnet his grandfather-in-law wrote after having Danie's mother fall asleep as a child on his lap. Finally I was able to translate the poem when my wife's and my gentle friend George Reid passed from this life in December 2017.

Slaap — (Sonnet van D F Malherbe [1881-1969])

Wat is die slaap 'n wondersoete ding!
Sag op haar bloue oë daal die vaak
soos maneskyn diep waterkuile raak
om daar te droom in silwer skemering.

Dr. Calvin Seerveld is husband to Ines Naudin ten Cate; their three children are Dordt graduates. He is Senior Member emeritus in Philosophical Aesthetics at the Graduate Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto.

Vir laas beef oor haar lippe 'n fluistering:
"Nag, Pappie." Ek merk hoe langsaam hy ge-
naak,
wat drome soet tot werklikhede maak:
in vaderarms rus my liefeling.
Sluit so my oë, God, wanneer vir my
u Engel wenk ter laaste, lange rus
en ek van wilde woeling hier moet skei;
en sterke Hand deur duisternisse lei.
Sluit so my oë, God, as ek gaan rus.

SLEEP — (translated by Calvin Seerveld,
3-12 January 2018)

Miraculously sweet the gift of sleep!
Drowsiness drifts over her blue eyes
like moonlight touching water from the skies
with shimmers full of promises to keep.
I watch sleep slowly steal over her lips:
she whispers, "Good night, Daddy," languidly
as dreams become her sweet reality.
Safe in my father arms my loved one slips.

Please close my eyes this way, O God, when
time
has come for me your winking angel knows,
to leave this agitated world behind,
and enter dreamingly Homeland repose.
Your mighty hand leads me where dark woes
cease,
so close my eyes now, God, to rest in peace.

The Petrarchan 8:6 line format of Malherbe's Afrikaans sonnet *Slaap* has an incredibly softly pedaled sweetness in its iambic pentameter, with

a very tight rhyme scheme (abbaabbacdecde). The tiptoe quiet of falling asleep is gently connoted by the slowly closing eyes of the child on the (grand)father's lap, as she whispers, "Night, Daddy," and dreamy reality covers her eyes like moonlight shimmering on a deep pool of water.

This is the Way, says the poet, I pray, O God, You let me go Home: let a dreaming wink of an angel steal like a shadow over my face so that I pass by this world of troubled agitation, and "slip" into the homestead haven of safety and rest Your arms will provide.

To catch in English the Afrikaans gentleness, I let the "drowsiness drifts" and alliterated sibilants of "sleep slowly steal" with "she whispers" slide over "languidly" to "safe in my father arms" the loved one "slips." "Slips" is the right word that mimics the Afrikaans' charming, involuntary **slowness of yet suddenly falling** asleep.

The first English line, with double off-rhyme "sweet" and "sleep," heightens its epigrammatic character and its role as leading summary exclamation of the whole sonnet. The quasi Shakespearian format of the English translated sonnet (4+4+4+2 lines, but abbaacddcefeegg rhyme) keeps the 8:6 format of content but allows the closing couplet to end the poem *in pace requiescat*, hinting that death is but a good, long restful sleep "safe in my Father's arms."

If you have ever been out on a summer night fishing in a row boat on The Great South Bay of Long Island, New York (the 5 mile wide water between the island and the reef, which separates the land from the Atlantic Ocean), you have seen the moonlight dance on the dark little waves and ripples and watched the mysterious green color in the water as the oars dip into the algae of the sea. There is a mysterious quiet in the warm darkness, as one listens to the lapping of the water against wood, like inducing sleepiness. So I dared alter the Afrikaans image of "diep waterkuile" (deep pools of water") to the comparable phenomenon I know first hand. And then I introduce an echo of the silent resolve of Robert Frost's man pausing in the road on a snowy night, then deciding to keep going sleepily, since he has "promises to keep."

"Night, Daddy" reminded me of Christ's

pleading "Abba" in Gethsemane, to which Sylvia Plath's angry "Daddy" poetic diatribe sounds an antithesis of breakage, clamor, and despair. Fathers who have provoked their daughter or son to anger have a curse to bear themselves, needing healing (Ephesians 6:4). The scene in the Afrikaans sonnet is almost too sweet, like Albert Anker's children asleep on the top of the warm stove.



Albert Anker, *Two girls on a warm stone stove top* (1895)

That is why the oxymoron of **slipping to safety** saves the poem from a saccharine domestic Idealism, especially when the last section turns over to face death. And I hear Walter Benjamin's angel, who faces the wild turbulence of violent human history, nevertheless **winking** at us: for us, the future cataclysm at his back is really the blessing of Dvorak's "Going home"! You are not lost, O grown-up child, but are prepped for a Homecoming, like that of Frost's hired man:

Home is the place there where, when you
have to go there,
They have to take you in.

And this "Homeland" is the place where you really belong and shall flourish, dwelling in safety (Zechariah 8:4-5).

My earlier developed Romantic admiration for Lord Byron was always impressed by the anecdote that his last words before dying were the Greek expression, δεῖ με νῦν καθεύδειν ("Is it necessary for me now to rest?"). Life is such a gift of adventurous activity. But a Christian season-

ing aware of neighbors throughout God's world is sobered by the reality of knowing that an unRomantic suffering is eating away at people's bodily lives. If you are world-aware today, you know that living, especially elderly life, is often more challenged, hard, and lonely than resting content on God's lap in the arms of Jesus. Whichever angel God sends to visit you in your isolated habitat or "Retirement Home," to give you the secret message "It's going to be all right soon, sister/brother," Paul Klee's staring (Benjamin) angel remains enigmatic and a little frightening (as happened to the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:26-30).



Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus* (1920)

Käthe Kollwitz' "Mother with child" catches Malherbe's tenderness without the Anker oversweetness. God holds us up sometimes by a simple supporting gesture, an encouraging word, a snatch of a hymn melody heard recalling one's childhood. Any act or memento—an old photograph—that reminds you of being cared for, of being safe, gentles a person and prepares one as if for sleep. That's why "Homeland" is a good (Afrikaans) word for describing our post mortem existence: a heavenly new earth is the place where



Käthe Kollwitz, *Mother with child* (1931-32)

we really belong, where we are "native," the assigned place we are peacefully to rule.

Malherbe's poem prompts me to wonder whether we could not take Jesus and the apostle Paul's Scriptural word for "death" as being "sleep" more childlikely as the comforting metaphorical truth, rather than treat it as simply a euphemistic turn of speech.

The biblical idiom is fairly consistent. When Jesus experienced the mourners wailing for Jairus' daughter, Jesus said, "She's not dead, but is sleeping" (οὐ ἀπέθανεν ἀλλὰ καθεύδει), and then they laughed at him (Luke 8:49-56). Jesus told his disciples, Lazarus "has fallen asleep" (κεκοίμηται), when Jesus was meaning Lazarus had "died" (ἀπέθανεν) [John 11:11-14]. Because Christ was in fact raised from the dead, argues Paul, those "who have fallen asleep in Christ," the saints who belong to Christ (ἐν τῷ χριστῷ), shall be made alive (I Corinthians 15:20-23), will surely rise up (ἀναστήσονται)...ahead of us who are still breath-alive when Christ returns (I Thessalonians 4:13-18).

The Bible's revelation does not vaporize the punishing anti-God evil reality of Death—"the final enemy" (ἔσχατος ἐχθρὸς, I Corinthians

15:265)—but is telling all who can read and hear the good news with childlike faith that whoever believes in Jesus Christ (as the saving Son of God who died in our place), “even though he or she die, they shall live. Whoever lives and has faith in me (says Jesus) **shall never die**” (John 11:25-26).

You go into a deep sleep (medical doctor Holy Spirit-filled Luke writes in Acts 7:60 about the stoned Stephen) until Christ wakes you up out of the dust (cf. Daniel 12:2) by taking your hand and raising you up like Jairus’ daughter. **The point of the Bible to anybody who is an adopted child of God is that Death is powerless to kill you.** Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection means eventually even Death will be ended (Revelation 20:11-15).

That poetic **truth** is deeper and more certain than any Almanac detailed **fact** about the next eclipse of the moon. When the LORD God takes back the breath of life God gave me some 87 years ago, I want my children to tell any people sad about my passing, “He’s just **sleeping** now, waiting **with Christ** (σὺν χριστῷ εἶναι, Philippians 1:23, **at home with the Lord** (ἐνδημῆσαι πρὸς τὸν κύριον, II Corinthians 5:8)—singing—for the Lord to come back in glory.”

It’s important to mention that my children will not be professing the “soul sleep” doctrine. The right way to initially read and hear Scripture is not dogmatically—looking for doctrines to defend—but to read it **literarily**, poetically, you could say, since God’s booked Word is literature, telling us what to trust and how to live...and “die,” as God’s kids.

Let me illustrate what I mean with a fine poem by Polish believer Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998), translated by the Dutch-American Alissa Valles:

ON TRANSLATING POETRY

Like a clumsy bumblebee
he alights on a flower
bending the fragile stem
he elbows his way
through rows of petals
like pages of a dictionary
he wants in

where the fragrance and sweetness are
and though he has a cold
and can’t taste anything
he pushes on
until he bumps his head
against the yellow pistil
and that’s as far as he gets
it’s too hard
to push through the calyx
into the root
so the bee takes off again
he emerges swaggering
loudly humming:
I was in there
and those
who don’t take his word for it
can take a look at his nose
yellow with pollen

Reading and interpreting Scripture is to be more like interpreting poetry than treating the Bible as if it be a legal document. And the Zbigniew Herbert poem about translating poetry is so wonderful because its understanding of the task remains itself elliptical, attesting to the impossibility of the endeavor, but rejoicing in the joy of the deed.

To leave a little mystery in one’s Bible-reading, but to have a splurge of happy gratefulness at the inside knowledge and certainty one has gathered from the happy holy struggle in listening to God speak in the Scriptures, is a great blessing. To treat the Bible as God-speaking **literature**, telling us over-all **a true story** does not lessen its God-breathed character (II Timothy 3:16-17), but intensifies its hope-giving lift to our trouble-impacted human lives. Who knows what the fantastic account of Matthew 27:50-53 means? And jailed Paul’s discouraged exclamation in Philippians 1:15-26 is not a license for suicide but a spirited testimony to the utter certainty of **everlasting life** (v.23) **with Jesus Christ**, come what may.

We go back to Malherbe’s sonnet on *Slaap*: to approach death can be Gethsemane-lonely, especially if it be attended by devilish pain. Not everybody reaches a patriarchal or matriarchal old age “full of years” and is quietly gathered to

be with one's ancestors (cf. Genesis 25:7-10, Job 42:16-17). So it is wise, in my judgment, to reform the earlier worldly-wise poet Andrew Marvell's (1621-1698) lines: if "at my back I always hear / Time's wingéd chariot hurrying near," that we robustly redeem the creatural life time each of us has been given (Ephesians 5:15-20, Colossians 4:5-6), bodily circumspect as a snake yet innocent as a dove (Matthew 10:16). And it is permissible, I believe, to pray to God to let you fall asleep safely in the arms of one who loves you, possibly hearing Psalm 90 read aloud, so you can be humming with pollen on your nose.

PSALM 90 (An intercessory prayer of Moses, a man of God)

- 1 My Lord, You have been our At-home in every generation.
- 2 Before mountains got born, before earth, this earth was begun,
from ever and for ever You are GOD!
- 3 You let men and women turn back to dust;
You say, "Go ahead back [to dirt,] you sons and daughters of Adam!"
- 4 I know, a thousand years look like yesterday to You, a day past;
- 5 You flash flood them away like a [brief] watch in the night.
People are a dream, like a plant which sprouts up early one morning,
- 6 breaks ground early on a morning, blossoms full,
by cool of the evening is withered and dead,
- 7 so we [seem] to disappear...under your anger?
worn out by your passionate pace....
- 8 You have set our guilty, dirtiest deeds in front of You.
You set our most secret sins right in front of your shining, glorious [expectant] face—
- 9 Is that why!? all our days get gone, all our years vanish like a startled sign
—because of your terrible, jealous anger!
- 10 We get seventy years of days (if you are extra strong, maybe eighty),
but what one boasts of in them is really troublesome labour and vanity
because hip-hop hurriedly it is gone, and we flit along.
- 11 Who truly understands the solid strength of your anger?!
Who is awe struck at your terribly jealous anger?!
- 12 Teach us to keep track of our days in such a way that our heart becomes knowing, wise.
- 13 Come on back, LORD God!—how long will You wait?
Come on back, and mercifully comfort us, your servants!
- 14 [Like] at a [new] day breaking, fill us so fully of your gracious faithfulness
that we simply laugh out loud, merrily enjoy ourselves the rest of our life!
- 15 Make us laugh for just as many days as you made us cry, humiliated.
[Make us happy, Lord,] for just as many years as You had us suffer evil.
- 16 Show us, your servants, your wonderful acts [again]!
and let our children see your glorious power!
- 17 May the gentle laugh of the Lord, our God, rest upon us,
And the workings of our hands,
You will bring that further for us, will you not?
Yes, the work of our hands, establish it solidly, [Lord]!
(translated by Calvin Seerveld, 1972 AD)